

Blissymbolics

Background Reading

for

2007 Dundee Think-Tank Participants

Blissymbolics

Blissymbolics is a graphic semantically-based language developed by Charles K. Bliss (1897-1985), first published in *Semantography-Blissymbolics* (Bliss, 1949, 1965). It was conceived by its originator as a system for international communication. It had its first functional usage at the *Ontario Crippled Children's Centre* (OCCC), Toronto, Canada (now called *Bloorview Kids Rehab*) in 1971 as a communication system for children with physical disabilities who were nonspeaking. The language was developed for this special application by an interdisciplinary team and it became widely used by both adults and children as one of the first Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) graphic representational systems. Since the initial application, it has been demonstrated to provide support to literacy and language development in addition to offering broad communication capabilities. For further information, visit www.blissymbolics.org.

Blissymbolics Communication International

BCI was established in 1975 in response to the wide interest in using Blissymbols internationally and the need for an organizational structure to support training, vocabulary, technology and support material development. Through legal agreements signed with C.K. Bliss in 1975 and 1982, BCI was granted an "exclusive, non-cancelable and perpetual, world-wide license for the application of Blissymbols, for use by handicapped persons and persons having communication, language and learning difficulties." A policy of entering into formal agreements with individuals and organizations that were willing to serve as formal representatives of BCI began in 1975 upon the formation of the organization. There was need for professionals to provide training and along with training there was a need for direction to be given in the over 33 countries and 17 languages in which Blissymbolics was introduced to persons who were nonspeaking. The successful use of Blissymbolics internationally, both by children and adults with communication needs, required this supportive infrastructure. It was gradually implemented as countries expressed an interest and were able to assume the responsibility. The first countries to undertake training in the application of Blissymbolics from the Toronto-based organization were the United Kingdom, Sweden, Australia, New Zealand and Germany. As representatives from each country trained to become Workshop Presenters, they undertook the tasks of translating vocabulary and teaching materials, maintaining standards in the presentation of the Blissymbols, and training clinicians and teachers. Over the years, those first trained by the Toronto team, trained professionals from other countries, Affiliates and Associates entered formal agreements with BCI and the use of Blissymbolics was supported in this way around the world. To-day, BCI has representation from six countries on its Board of Directors.

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2023 with funding from
University of Toronto

https://archive.org/details/OTUED_8-10-3-2-1

Blissymbol Vocabulary Development

The first set of Blissymbols used by children was drawn by the OCCC draftsman, under the supervision of Margrit Beesly, occupational therapy member of the original clinical team. The work was monitored by Charles K. Bliss. The rules for their representation were formulated as the drafting work proceeded. These rules were integrated into the training and publications developed by the OCCC team until 1975. This practice was continued by BCI. Initially, Blissymbols were drawn following the model of a rudimentary template appearing in the first edition of *Semantography* (Bliss, 1965). A refined template was designed by Patricia Bailey and produced in the United Kingdom in 1976. This was made available to all national groups teaching Blissymbolics and served as the standard for the drawing of new and established Blissymbols.

In 1976, Jinny Storr was named the first Symbol Officer, and charged with the responsibility of documenting the rules of constructing Blissymbols while working with C.K. Bliss to further develop the BCI Authorized Vocabulary. In this role Jinny Storr served in a volunteer capacity until 1983. During her watch, the BCI Authorized Vocabulary was published in *Blissymbols for Use* (Hehner, 1982), containing 1,400 Blissymbol words. In 1983, the Board of Directors passed a motion presented by Dr. Richard Storr that established policies, a plan of organization and administrative practices with regard to the development of Blissymbolics. Resulting from this action, a Symbol Secretariat was established with Claudia Wood hired to work as its Symbol Officer. Her first responsibility was the development of a formal set of *Fundamental Rules for the Standard Blissymbolics of BCI* and providing training and support for this endeavour. Secondly, she was charged with the responsibility of developing vocabulary through mailings of questionnaires to members of an International Panel, to be followed by meetings of Panel Members each two to three years. This work culminated in the publication of the *Blissymbol Reference Guide* (Reich, Storr, and Wood, 1992) containing 2,300 Blissymbol words. In this publication, the technology used to provide the standard for the printing of the Blissymbols was the Reich font (1989). In 1993, a two-byte graphic character set of the 2,304 Blissymbol words appearing in the *Blissymbol Reference Guide* was registered with the *International Organization for Standardization* (ISO-IR 169, 1993-01-21). Claudia Wood provided leadership as Symbol Officer until 1991 when the manuscript for the *Blissymbol Reference Guide* was completed.

In 1996, at the BCI Affiliate Meeting in Vancouver, the responsibilities of the Symbol Secretariat were formally transferred to Britt Amberntson, Margareta Jennische, and Kirsten Lorstrom of Sweden. They have continued the role of overseeing the work of the Blissymbolics International Panel and the ongoing development of the BCI Authorized Vocabulary through to the present. In 1998, at the BCI Affiliate Meeting in Dublin, an ad hoc group (Michael Everson, Gillian Hazell, Shirley McNaughton, Annalu Waller, Judy Wine) was charged with the task of preparing a new single document to build on the original *Fundamental Rules*, provide a comprehensive set of guidelines, and address the concerns of ensuring compatibility of Blissymbolics with the Universal Character Set (UCS) protocol. Discussion and work on this document continued at meetings of the International Panel and of Affiliates in Cape Town, South Africa; Washington, USA; Bala, Canada; Furuboda, Sweden; and Charlbury, UK. The final document is published

along with the *Blissymbol Reference Guide Supplement* (BCI, 2004), containing over 700 additional Bliss-words that had been added to the *BCI Authorized Vocabulary* since 1992. This brought the total to over 3,000 Bliss-words in 2004. The Bliss-words appearing in the *Fundamental Rules*, 2004, were produced by the character-based TrueType font for Blissymbolics under development by Michael Everson. In 2006, Peter Lindsay, produced an updated version of the *Blissymbol Reference Guide Supplement*. The 2006 edition contains an additional 588 Bliss-words, approved since 2004. This brings the number of Bliss-words in the published *BCI Authorized Vocabulary* to a total of 3,588 (2006).

Changes since the first decade of Blissymbol usage

Major changes have occurred in educational and AAC practices since Blissymbolics was first introduced in 1971. During the eighties, segregated classrooms in which specialized instruction could be given to support the language and communication development of each student within a small group of children, gradually came to be replaced by integrated classrooms, in which the focus was upon the child with special needs sharing in the instructional program being provided for the full class. This had a strong negative impact upon the use of Blissymbolics, beginning in the eighties - first in North America and then in many other countries. The successful use of Blissymbolics requires teacher training and the allocation of ongoing regular instructional time while the language of Blissymbolics is learned and applied. Within the integrated school program, this time for teacher training and individualized instruction was not feasible. The introduction of commercially available picture vocabularies such as *Picture Communication Symbols* (PCS) and *Rebus*, which could easily be learned by teacher and student quickly became the graphic system of choice by most schools and clinics in North America and many other countries. Many support materials and software for picture-based systems became available. Communication through a large set of pre-programmed phrases and sentences being available to the user became the primary and sometimes sole focus of instruction and development of a language foundation was given limited if any attention. The Nordic countries serve as an outstanding exception to this trend, as they continued to support the use of Blissymbolics for both communication and language development for children who demonstrated language learning ability.

Impact of Technology Advancement

A second development affecting the use of Blissymbolics beginning in the eighties was the application of synthetic and digitized speech technology to voice output devices, making this exciting capability available to those who could not speak. In the transition to voice output communication aids (VOCAs) from communication boards and books, the qualities of the graphic representational system on the device received little attention. The graphic that came with the device was the graphic that the individual was expected to use. Blissymbolics as a graphic language supported by a non-profit organization was not part of this major commercial development. Many Bliss users were given no choice but the graphics that appeared on their VOCA, and their option of using Blissymbolics was terminated.

A third development beginning in the eighties was the introduction of the personal microcomputer, to be followed by the emergence and world-wide dissemination of telecommunications and the internet. The impact of the technology advancements upon AAC users is documented by Peter Lindsay in a review article, published in the fall of 2001 (*Communicating Together*, Vol 17, No. 4). In North America, the *Talking BlissApple* was developed by Greg Vanderheiden in the early eighties and was used by many Bliss users during that decade. However, the software was not upgraded to be compatible with new technology, and only those with early Apple computers could use it. Of notable support in the nineties to Blissymbolics usage was the development of software by European manufacturers, e.g., *Bliss for Windows* by Handicom, The Netherlands, and *WinBliss*, by AnyCom, Sweden. This enabled Europeans to remain longer with Blissymbols. The high cost of this software in North America made it non-competitive in Canada and USA. *BlissWrite* and *BlissInternet* was developed for BCI in Canada by Russell Galvin. However, limited marketing expertise on the part of BCI resulted in this software never being widely used.

From Staff to Volunteer Support

Within the Bliss community a further change occurred during the nineties and into the twenty-first century. With the decreasing number of Bliss users in North America, the administrative work of BCI had to become solely volunteered. In 1989, Shirley McNaughton retired from the position of Executive Director and George Wilson, Chair, since 1975, also retired. Lang Moffat became the new Chair, and Shirley McNaughton became Vice-Chair. Early in the nineties, Katherine Seybold, who had worked part-time as administrator, became Treasurer, and Peter Lindsay became Secretary. As much as possible the work associated with information dissemination, legal arrangements, liaison with Affiliates and support to training and to adult Bliss users in North America, was undertaken by these Canadian members of the Executive Committee of the Board of Directors. However, there was always more work than could be accomplished by the volunteer group in Toronto. In 2000, at the Meeting of Affiliates and Associates in Washington, a revised organizational structure was approved, and some of the responsibilities previously undertaken in Toronto were assumed by Affiliates. The development of vocabulary was already being very capably managed by the BCI Secretariat in Sweden. In 2000, Affiliate arrangements were delegated to Bliss representatives in The Netherlands, legal arrangements were transferred for a short time to representatives in the UK and an International Representative was added to the Executive Committee. This re-alignment of responsibilities has proven to have many difficulties, and as of 2007, the only international responsibility that is still in place is that of the International representative on the Executive Committee, Ingrid Mattsson Muller, who carried on from Judy Wine, beginning 2005.

Maintaining the Opportunity to Use Bliss

Through recent years as Blissymbolics usage has fallen, its proponents have remained firm in their belief that it offers a high standard of communication and language learning to AAC users. They maintain their volunteered support to contribute to Blissymbolics being available to those who wish to use it – be it few or many. Supporters have concern regarding the lack of attention being given to language development and literacy

preparation due to the wide-spread use of picture-based graphic symbols. And they maintain that it is inadequate to rely solely upon voice output and not have a communication system comprised of many components - one of which is a strong graphic representational system. The waning use of Blissymbolics with children except in a few countries, the firm conviction of those who have witnessed the strong language and literacy accomplishments of those who received competent Blissymbol instruction as children, along with the opportunities offered by new technology and linguistic possibilities has made it apparent to the BCI Board of Directors that a strategic review is needed of BCI's organizational structure and current practices. There is a recognition that consideration must be given to the many opportunities that are now available to the application of Blissymbolics through advancements in technology and the renewed interest in language and literacy development within the AAC field. There is interest on the part of some in the Blissymbolics community for additional approaches to be explored in parallel with maintaining the Panel/Secretariat process for the development of new Bliss-words. This interest comes in response to the need for greater speed in creating vocabulary and to accommodate to the use of Blissymbolics on VOCAs and in literacy and translation applications. Overall, there is a growing awareness in the AAC community at large that current AAC practice still falls short in supporting the development of capabilities needed for AAC users to achieve their highest communication and literacy potential and to live full and productive lives as contributors to society. Those knowledgeable in Blissymbolics wish to participate in strengthening the support available to AAC users.

Looking to the Future, Supported by Knowledge from the Past

The changing world and the opportunities before us have led to the planning of a Blissymbolics Think-Tank for the summer of 2007 at the University of Dundee. Presenting the Key-Note Address will be Jinny Storr, providing the foundation for the Think-Tank discussion from her experience of over 35 years in the development of Blissymbols, and as the team member who worked the longest and closest with C.K. Bliss. The Co-Chairs of the Think-Tank are Annalu Waller, Ph.D., Lecturer, School of Computing, University of Dundee, and Shirley McNaughton, Ph.D., Vice Chair, BCI. Annalu Waller brings knowledge from her experience in giving leadership to the introduction of Blissymbolics in South Africa during the eighties and her strong ongoing interest in the role of technology in supporting Blissymbolics. Joining with her as Co-Chair, Shirley McNaughton brings her experience from serving BCI in a range of administrative and teaching roles through over 35 years. Members of the Planning Committee all have a long-time association with Blissymbolics. The committee members are Peter Lindsay, Ph.D., (Canada), Judy Wine, Ph.D., (Israel), Margareta Jennische, Ph.D. (Sweden). In the preparation and planning for the Think-Tank, it is particularly valuable to have the contribution of two members of the original pioneering team – Shirley McNaughton, teacher, and Judy Seligman-Wine, speech-language-pathologist. They have each remained involved throughout their careers with the application of Blissymbolics within AAC. The former will bring her experience as an educator serving as Program Director, then Executive Director, then Vice-Chair, Board of Directors, Blissymbolics Communication International (BCI) in Toronto. The latter will bring her experience as a leader in AAC in Israel and as BCI Board Member and Coordinator,

International Committees (2000-2005). Both also bring their experience in providing leadership in the formation and development of the organization established in 1983 to support the use of AAC, *International Society for Augmentative and Alternative Communication (ISAAC)*. In addition, contributing their valuable knowledge to the Think-Tank, will be clinicians and teachers who have served as BCI Affiliates and Associates and have given direction to the application and development of Blissymbol usage in their countries and in their languages. They bring a wealth of practical experience in the application of Blissymbolics.

The objective of the Think-Tank is to provide a forum at which specialists in related fields, through presentations followed by discussion with Blissymbolics experts, can help those in the Blissymbolics community look to the future. It is hoped that the Think-Tank outcome will be supportive to the BCI Board of Directors in enabling Blissymbolics to realize its full potential as an AAC Graphic representational system “ for use by handicapped persons and persons having communication, language and learning difficulties.”

Think-Tank Task

Recognizing that the language of Blissymbolics has been demonstrated in the 20th century to have the inherent capabilities for providing persons who are nonspeaking with a first language that can serve as a bridge to literacy or as a lifelong communication system

And

Recognizing that BCI, since 1975 has had the perpetual world-wide license from C.K. Bliss for the application of Blissymbolics by persons with communication, language and learning difficulties

And

Recognizing (a) the financial limitations of BCI as a nonprofit Canadian charity, (b) the teaching constraints presented by integrated schooling, (c) the limited time for instructors and supporters to gain training, and (d) the range of positions on the part of BCI Board members as to the way to proceed into the future:

As an invited speaker, you would be asked to prepare a paper and speak to the following questions, drawing on your area of expertise, with the objective of providing BCI with recommendations to be considered within the organization’s strategic planning for the future.

Questions

What action should BCI take:

1. To ensure that the language of Blissymbolics as used by persons who are nonspeaking reaches its highest potential and is available to all those who could benefit from it.

For example:

- a. Vocabulary development by means of *top-down* (Secretariat and Panel), *bottom-up* (users freely “spelling” Bliss-words with authorized Bliss-characters) or *both*;
- b. distribution through publications and software that are *commercially available* or *available freely on the web*;
- c. attempted control by *copyright and royalty enforcement* or *open source* or *another alternative?*)

2. To ensure that the development of the language of Blissymbolics takes full advantage of the technological capabilities of the 21st century.

For example:

- a. type of arrangements with AAC manufacturers and interaction between different AAC graphic representation systems;
- b. BCI web site for software distribution and training;
- c. development and distribution of electronic font technology;
- d. interaction with WC3 and other bodies.

3. To ensure that the linguistic features developed within the language of Blissymbolics accommodate the range of applications for which the language is used.

For example:

- a. face-to-face communication using manual communication displays; voice output devices; translations to and from native language to Blissymbolics;
- b. fostering language development when used as first expressive language in parallel with native language as receptive language;
- c. serving as a bridge to literacy.

Prepared by Shirley McNaughton, January, 2007

